

Keith-Albee Building
Fifteenth & G Sts., NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-423

HABS
DC,
WASH,
455-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HABS
DC
WASH.
455-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

KEITH-ALBEE BUILDING

HABS No. DC-423

Location: 15th and G Streets, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Present Owner: World Corner Building, Inc.

Present Use: Moving picture theatre.

Significance: Initially designed for vaudeville and silent films, the 1,850 seat theatre was incorporated into a large, mixed usage office building in the heart of Washington's financial district. The elegant theatre was a primary feature in a building which included shops, office space, a subterranean promenade, and Turkish baths.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners--legal description of property: The theatre and office building occupy Lot 18 of Square 224, Washington, D.C. Riggs Realty Company purchased Lot 18 in 1909. On May 28, 1910, Plimpston B. Chase signed a twenty-year lease of the building and basement to begin August 1, 1912. The lease was reassigned to B. F. Keith on August 29, 1913. On May 1, 1920, Riggs Realty sold the building to Claremont Theatre Corporation for \$1,095.00. Claremont deeded the building to B. F. Keith on April 3, 1926. B. F. Keith sold the building to Wotan Theatre Corporation on December 18, 1935 for \$1,200,000. On December 27, 1956, Wotan sold the building to World Corner Building, Inc., for \$1,500,000. The current lease of the theatre was assigned to RKO-Stanley Warner Theatres, Inc., in 1969.
2. Date of erection: Building permit number 5673 was issued on June 8, 1911. The estimated cost of the improvement was \$750,000.
3. Architect: Jules Henri de Sibour. Trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, J. H. de Sibour was one of the National Capital's most successful and prolific architects during his thirty years of practice. His designs include the Wilkins, Hibbs, F. H. Smith, and Investment office buildings and the Chevy Chase and University clubs. In addition to the house at 1520 Twentieth Street, he also designed the French Embassy (2221 Kalorama Road, N.W.); the Wilkins residence (Peruvian Chancery, 1700 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.); the Moore residence (Canadian Chancery, 1746 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.); and the Stewart

residence (Embassy of Luxembourg, 2200 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.). The most outstanding example of his work surveyed to date is 1746 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. (Withey).

4. Builders and Suppliers: Construction was by Wells Brothers, a New York City firm.
5. Original Plans and Construction: The architect's Plan of Projections is recorded on microfilm at the National Archives. No working drawings have been located.
6. Alterations and Additions: When B. F. Keith took over the theatre in 1913, the newspaper announced plans for improvements costing \$25,000, to include improved lighting, new carpeting, and air conditioning. A major renovation in the early 1950's radically altered the entrance lobby and lounge areas, and sealed off the lower level promenade. A wide projection screen was installed onstage.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

The theatre opened on August 19, 1912, as Chase's Polite Vaudeville Theatre, "Washington's Largest, America's Finest and the World's Model, Modern Theatre." Plimpston B. Chase, credited with coining the term "polite vaudeville", converted the Grand Opera House at 1424 Pennsylvania Avenue to Chase's Theatre in 1904, managing the theatre until 1913. Compared to the former playhouse, the new Chase's Theatre was praised as being more commodious and more structurally sound. The theatrical fare was to be the same "clean, wholesome entertainment at prices that enabled even poor people to find diversion from the monotony of life." In addition to gala vaudeville productions, Kinemacolor films were shown.

Mr. Chase retired in August of 1913, selling the theatre building to B. F. Keith. An article published in The Washington Post on August 28 proclaimed, "The name of Keith stands for everything that is best in vaudeville. Benjamin Franklin Keith literally created vaudeville. On July 6, 1885, he initiated continuous performances at the Gaiety Museum in Boston, the first vaudeville house in America. His fortune is estimated at 50 million. He operates thirty-first class vaudeville theatres in cities east of Chicago, and is affiliated with the Orpheum circuit, which operates thirty west of Chicago. His Boston and Philadelphia houses are well known all over the world for their beauty, elaborate furnishings, and wonderful detail of management."

A second article, published on September 7, 1913, announced Keith's New Policy for the Old Chase's: "E. F. Albee, general manager of all

the Keith Theatres, and of the United Booking agency of New York, will have personal charge of the new house, and Miss Winnefred De Witt will continue as resident manager. Mr. Keith can obtain internationally famous acts at half price the sum paid by Chase. When a man controls the bookings of almost every big vaudeville theatre in the U.S., he is in a position to dictate terms for engagements in any particular city."

During the years of vaudeville, Keith's Theatre enjoyed great popularity. A plaque commemorating the frequent attendance of President Woodrow Wilson was placed in the theatre's presidential box in 1931.

For the most part, the theatre has proved a success as a movie house, too, although the widely fanned seating arrangement is better suited to live performances. In the early 1950's, a close-circuit television was installed to permit limited viewing of fights and other feature events. The current management still utilizes the Peerless Magnarc projectors installed over thirty years ago.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Important Views: Exterior photograph of the Riggs Office building and theatre, in Selections from the Work of J. H. de Sibour, Architect, Washington, D.C. Edward F. Gruver Co., Washington, D.C.: Bookbinder. Private publication: property of Mr. Jay L. de Sibour, grandson of J. H. de Sibour.
2. Original and Unpublished Sources:
 - a. Records of Building, Building Permits, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
 - b. Records of the Recorder of Deeds, Washington, D.C.
 - c. Interview with Mr. R. Tooter, Assistant Manager of Keith's Theatre.
3. Secondary and Published Sources: The Washington Post: August 4, 1912, August 19, 1912, August 28, 1913 and September 7, 1913 and The Evening Star.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Interest and Merit: Keith's Theatre is a note-

worthy example of a high-class vaudeville and movie theatre integrated into a mixed usage office building.

2. Condition of Fabric: Although in need of cleaning, the original exterior is little changed. The interior of the building is vacant, except for the theatre.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Number of Stories: The office building is eight stories high with full basement. The theatre grid extends the full height of the building. The auditorium to the rear is five stories high.
2. Over-all dimensions: The office building is 177.25' on G Street and 115.71' on 15th Street. From the curb at 15th and G to the highest part of the roof measures 95'. The building contains 20,355 square feet of space.
3. Layout, Shape: Rectangular..
4. Number of Bays: The 15th Street facade is seven bays wide. The G Street facade is eleven bays, seven of which adjoin the theatre auditorium.
5. Foundations: Concrete and concrete steel.
6. Wall Construction, Finish, Color: The side and rear walls are of plain, white brick laid in common bond. The facades on 15th and G Streets and three bays facing the alley are of unpolished white marble. The first two stories have a rusticated treatment.

The seven bays of the 15th Street facade are defined by eight four-story pilasters, with a balustraded base at the third story and an entablature extending the full width of the building between the sixth and seventh stories. The four central pilasters are fluted; the two on either side are square. The pilaster capitals are modified Renaissance Corinthian supporting a stepped architrave, paneled frieze, and cornice with block modillions. The cyma recta is ornamented with lion heads. Above the seventh story is a second, simpler cornice, separating the main building from a copper-plated mansard roof, which has seven pedimented dormers. Between the pilasters of the five center bays are paired windows, beginning at the second story level and continuing to the roof. The outer bays have single windows. The sash are wooden, double hung, one-over-one lights, with flat-arched lintels. Between each window group are bas-relief panels with classical swags, wreaths, and rinceau designs. The ground

floor shop display windows and doorways are surmounted by flat-arched lintels with Corinthian keystones.

The eleven bays of the G Street facade are defined by twelve four-story pilasters, a similar cornice and roofline. However, the G Street facade is divided visually into two sections. The four bays closest to 15th Street, which include the main entrance to the office space, are identical to the 15th Street facade. Between the squared pilasters of the fifth bay is an unfenestrated panel, indicating structurally the point at which the auditorium of the theatre begins. A second unfenestrated panel at the alley end of the building balances the composition. The five center bays at the rear of the auditorium have single windows at the third and fifth story levels. The windows are set into panels with crossettes, draped with elaborately carved garlands and central blank cartouche surmount each masque. Alternating tragic and comic masques appear also in the bas-relief panels above the center three auditorium exits. The five double-doored auditorium exits have an iron-work transom in rinceau pattern. Two decorated iron display cases separate the center three doors from the outer two.

7. Marquee and Signs: The original marquee on the G Street facade was a flat canopy projecting 8' and extending 82'. The whole was suspended on chains from ornamental anchor plates in the wall below the base of the pilasters. This marquee has since been removed.

No record remains of the original 15th Street marquee. The current marquee is a two-panel, wedge-shaped attraction board with interchangeable letters on an opaque ground, above which is an ornamental illuminated frame suspended from the logo, R.K.O. Keith. At the corner of the building on the G Street side is a tall vertical sign with the name of the theatre in lights.

8. Outer Lobby: The central bay and the adjoining bay to the south on the 15th Street facade open into a wedge-shaped outer lobby approximately 20' by 15'. The original lobby was altered considerably during the renovation in the 1950's, although an article in The Washington Post on August 4, 1912 describes it as such: "The white marble entrance arches are flanked outside and inside by attractive metal transparency casings. The walls are of multi-hued Sienna marble, surmounted by a frieze composed of Rookwood pottery plaques; the ceiling is bronzed, with stained glass windows, letting a subdued light play upon metal surfaces within it range; Italian marble benches invite the waiting throng." The modernization in the 1950's replaced the original rose-toned marble with striated green marble, veneered panels,

mirrors, and recessed lighting. The original free-standing ticket booth in the center of the outer lobby also was removed at that time. Swinging glass doors replaced the red leather upholstered wooden doors. On the right hand wall of the outer lobby is a door and steep winding stairs, leading to two office rooms on the second floor, occupied by the manager of the theatre.

9. Doors and Openings: In addition to the entrance doors described above, there is a pair of double doors providing exit from the auditorium into the alley.
10. Structural System and Framing: The building is of steel and masonry-bearing wall construction. The thickness of the external walls at the first story is 18"; at the eighth story, 13".

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Basement: One of the most unique features of the theatre is on the lower level, although the area is now blocked off. At the rear of the auditorium are stairs leading to a subterranean promenade. The Washington Post, in an article published on August 19, 1912, described the space: "Below the level of the auditorium is the distinctly revolutionary feature of the new Chase's---a wonderful promenade which realizes all the advance promises of amplitude and beauty. The woodwork is old English oak with broad low settles, wonderfully shaded lights, severely simple tiled floors, and white stone ceiling. At the right, some ten steps above the floor of the promenade is an antechamber with an enormous open fireplace and a massive mantel of marble and weathered oak copied after a mantel in an English baronial home. Adjoining the main promenade are two retiring rooms. The men's library is finished in leather, with old English divans, arm chairs and library tables. The ladies' library is finished in plush. Concealed in the south wall of the promenade is a great electric pipe organ. Above the paneled oak wainscotting of this magnificent lounge are the shields, in colors of all the leading colleges and universities of America. Smoking will be premitted here."

The rib-vaulted promenade is four bays wide and five bays long. The ceiling is supported by five square columns, evenly spaced and covered in heavy oak paneling with a cornice and block modillions. A marble staircase leads to the ground floor.

Adjoining the basement promenade and extending beneath the theatre auditorium to the stage area is a series of passages and

rooms to be used as dressing rooms, locker rooms, green room, animal quarters, and stage equipment departments. Below the stage floor is an open space 14' deep, "so that a hippodrome lake might almost be staged there." According to the newspapers, "Before work on the theatre began, Mr. Chase solicited suggestions from all classes of vaudeville entertainers, with the result that provisions have been made for the comfort and health of those behind the scenes which are not to be found in any other playhouse in the world. For example, the proprietor of an animal act will find electric stoves in his animal quarters, so that food may be cooked for monkeys and other delicate creatures. Special bathtubs have been provided for dogs, cats, and other dumb performers. A special lavatory has been provided for 'black face' performers. One room below the stage has been equipped with a steam drying apparatus, where all damp clothing may be placed and dried almost instantaneously. This is an exclusive Chase feature." The subterranean catcombs are little recognizable today for their former convenience and modernity.

Two stairways lead from beneath the stage to the orchestra enclosure. Elevators on either side of the stage give access to four additional levels of dressing rooms, for a total of 25.

2. The Stage: The stage is constructed in sections on yard square, so that any portion of the floor may be removed almost instantaneously without cutting of traps. The stage is exceptionally low, to permit better viewing for patrons in the front rows. The width of the proscenium arch is 44' and the height is 36'. The stage is 50' wide and 35' deep. A steel curtain could be raised and lowered by an automatically hydraulic pump.

Although now dismantled the theatre switchboard was once noteworthy: "The switchboard on the stage is unique in that it is operated magnetically instead of by electricity. The true electric switchboard is in a fireproof vault far below the level of the street, and the stage board acts as a shock and spark proof relay station."

The stage now is occupied by a large movie projection screen, installed during the 1950's. The rope counterweight system is no longer operable.

3. Inner Lobby: The inner lobby is rectangular with a central staircase leading to the mezzanine and upper balcony. Beneath the stairs is a check room and a door to the backstage area. The entrance to the main auditorium is to the left of the

central staircase. Ten feet further to the left are the stairs to the lower lounges and promenade. The inner lobby was completely redone during the most recent modernization.

4. Auditorium: The walls of the auditorium are covered with red silk tapestry. On either side wall of the auditorium originally were two boxes at the mezzanine level, and two at the upper balcony level. The box draperies and theatre curtain were of ruby-red plush, with fringes of gold. The boxes have since been removed. A door veiled in the drapes of the lofts on either side of stage lead to backstage.

The arched lofts to either side of the proscenium are enclosed in an elaborate plasterwork surround. A wreathed lyre pattern outlines the curve of the proscenium; ornate anthemion designs are used throughout. Above the proscenium within the plasterwork surround in the curve of the roofline is a large undecorated rectangular panel flanked by two cartouches. Extensive diaper-work fills the overarching surround, emphasizing the breadth and span of the proscenium.

The orchestra enclosure has been covered over with metal sheeting. The \$1,838-seat auditorium is fan-shaped, with seating for 845 on the ground floor, 510 in the mezzanine and 483 in the upper balcony. Picturesque curving aisles divide the orchestra seating into three sections. Two doors on each sidewall give exit from the auditorium. The original mahogany chairs upholstered in red leather have been replaced by standard plush, fold-down theatre seats.

The cantilevered mezzanine overhangs row 12 of the orchestra, thus making the theatre seem smaller and more intimate. A plaster frieze of alternating comic and tragic masques ornaments the mezzanine overhang. The original 10 mezzanine boxes have been replaced by standard seats.

The cantilevered balcony exactly overhangs the mezzanine. Seating rises steeply to the roof line. The fireproof steel motion picture cabinet and booth for all spotlights is at the rear of the upper balcony.

The lighting in the auditorium is electric bulbs concealed behind opalescent globes, inset into the mezzanine and balcony overhangs. Instead of a central chandelier, there originally was an oval painting on canvas, "Fete de Nuit". Because the ceiling has leaked, it has been plastered over a number of times.

The stairway at the back of the auditorium and the central entrance stairs allow the audience to enter either balcony at the bottom or the top. Exits are so numerous that the theatre can be emptied in 60 seconds.

The theatre is steam heated and air-conditioned.

D. Site and Surroundings:

Keith's Theatre faces the west facade of U.S. Treasury across 15th Street and is next door to the National Metropolitan Bank, constructed in 1905-1907. The G Street facade of the building originally faced onto a trolley car terminus, the tracks for which have since been removed.

Prepared by:
Floy A. Brown
George Washington University
Washington, D.C.

-BASEMENT-FLOOR-PLAN-

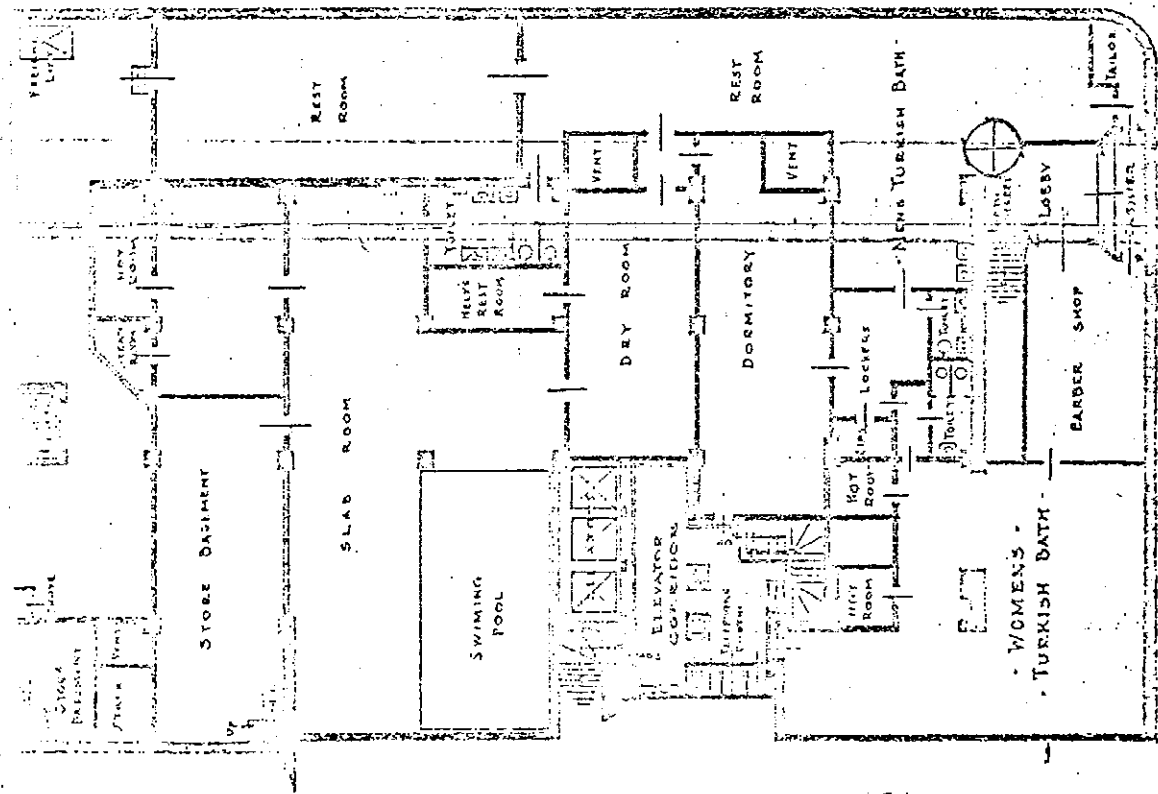
Scale = 1/16" = 1'-0"

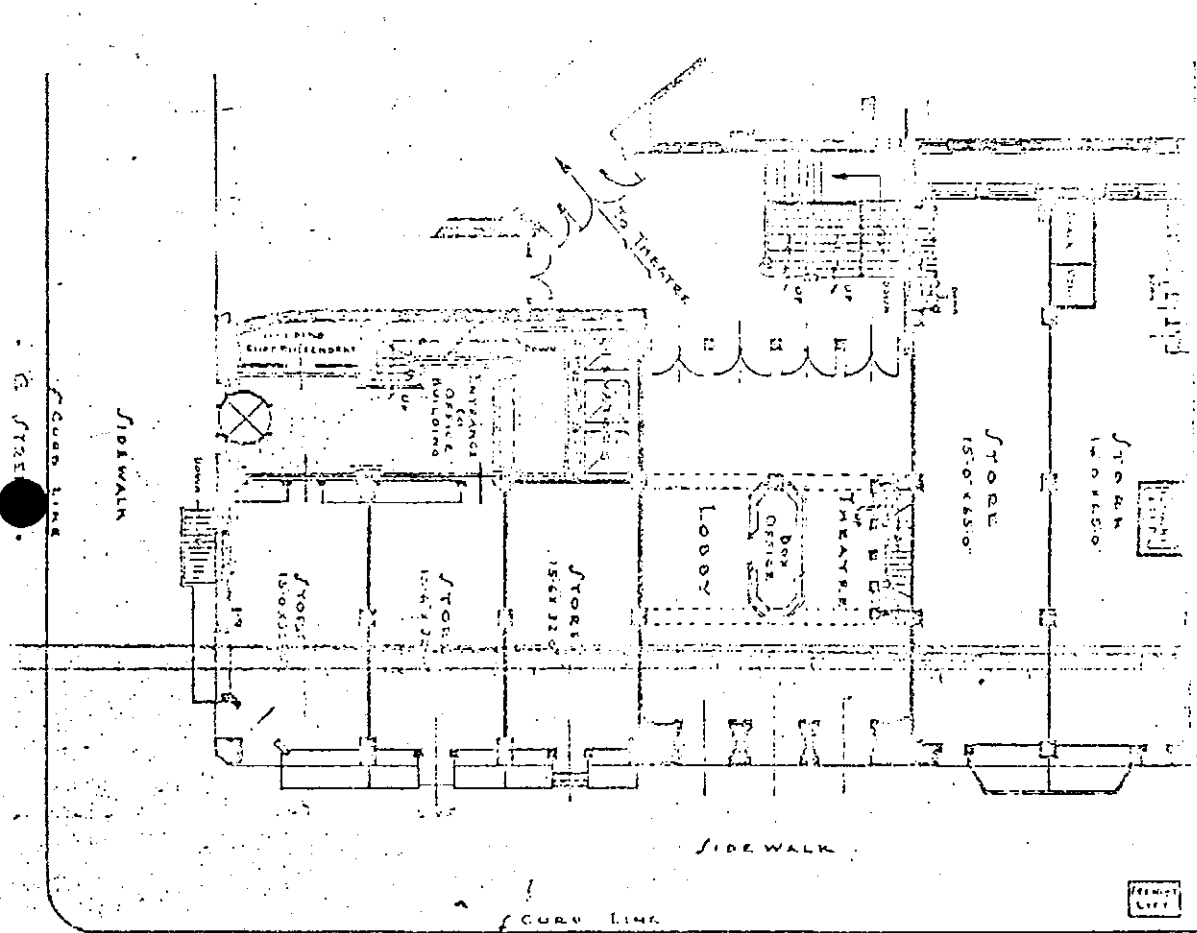
- ALBEE BUILDING -

FIFTEENTH AND G STREETS
WASHINGTON, D. C.

127'-0"

81'





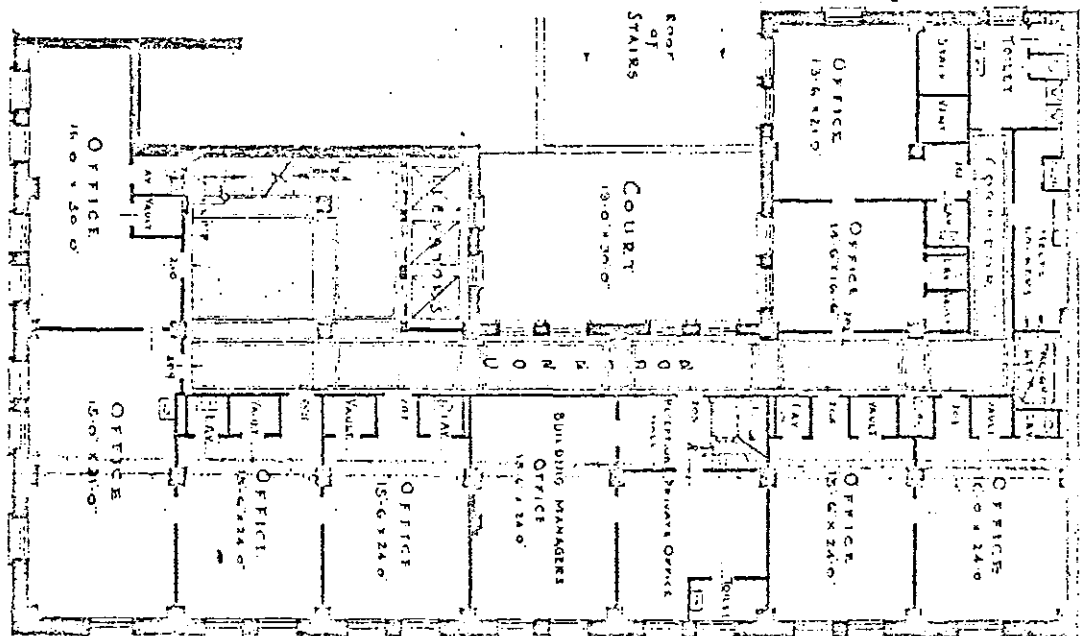
• FIFTEENTH STREET •

First Floor: Plan

SECRET 12-01

AIDEE BUILDING

FIFTEENTH AND G ST.
WASH. D.C. 20004



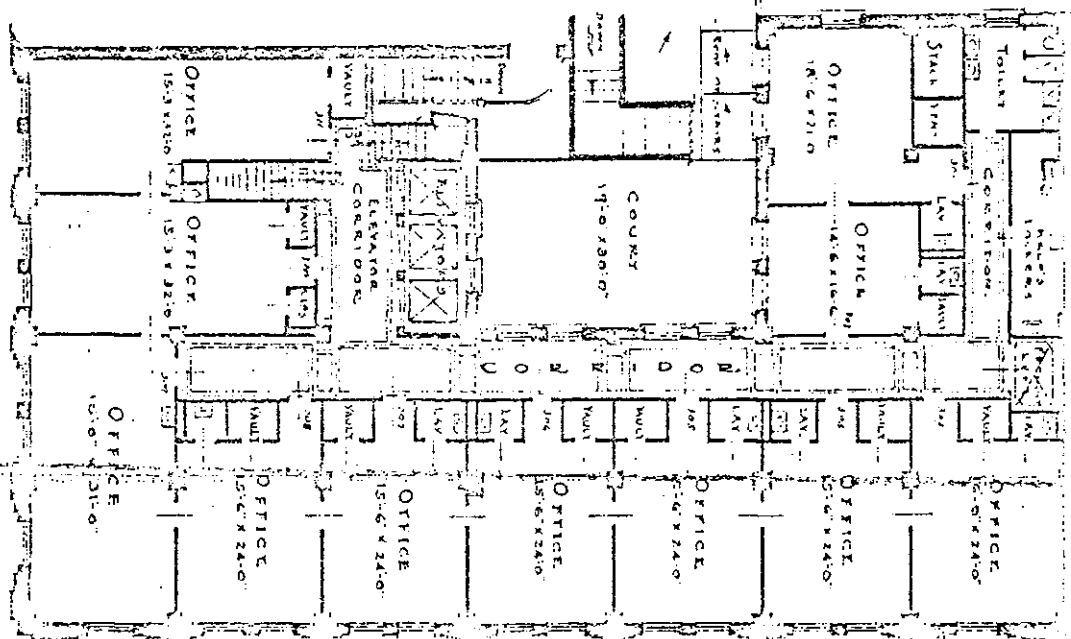
· SECOND FLOOR PLAN ·

CEILING FIFTY 10'-10"

• ALBEE BUILDING •

FIFTIETH AND G STREETS
WASHINGTON, D. C.

2000-2001



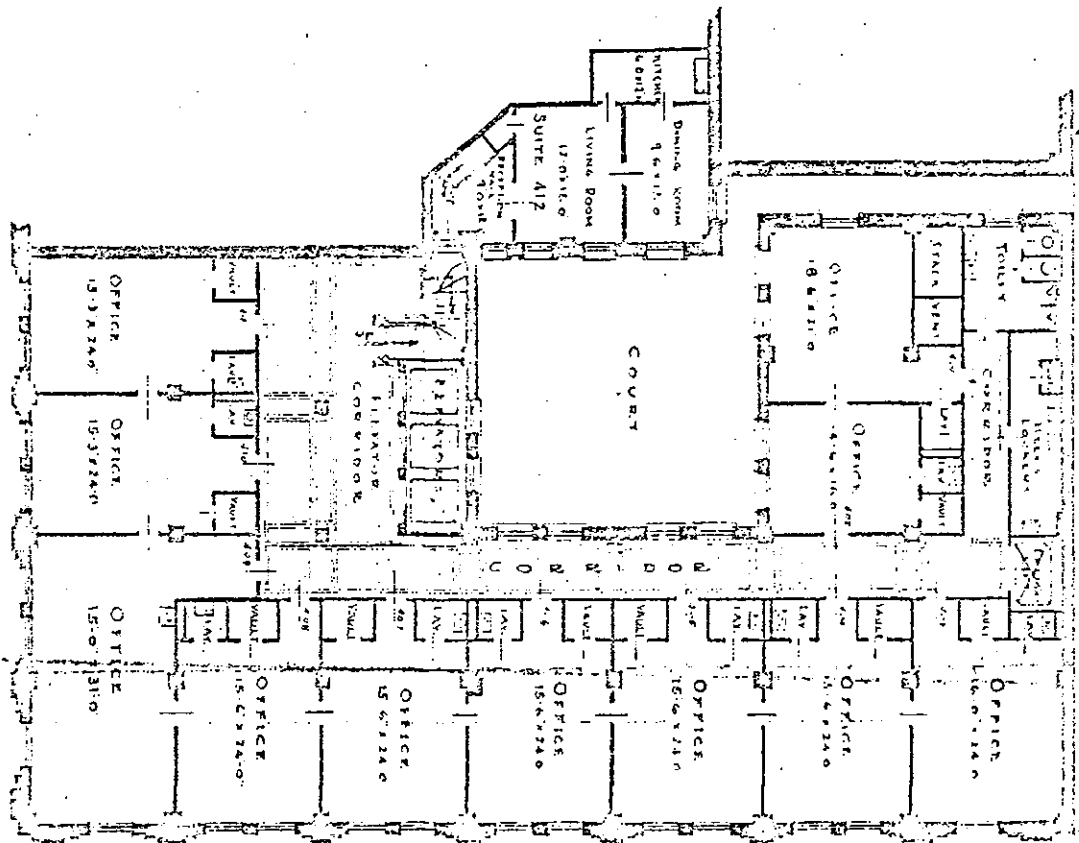
THIRD FLOOR PLAN

CEILING HEIGHT 11'-0"

ALBEE BUILDING

FIFTEENTH AND Q STREETS
WASHINGTON, D. C.

22-17-33



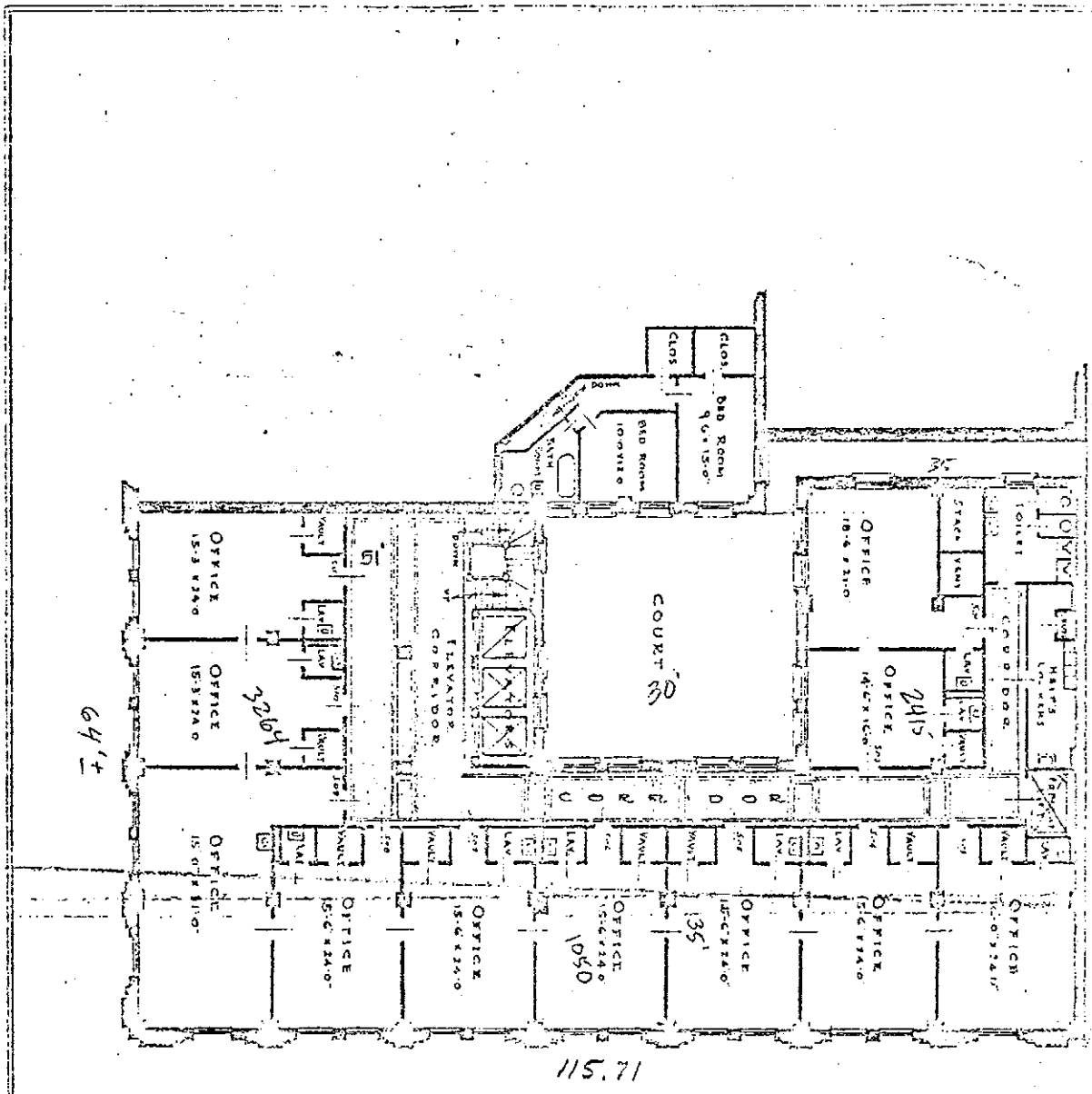
• FOURTH FLOOR PLAN •

CHILINA MICHAEL P. A.

- A.I.B.F.F. BUILDING -

FIFTEENTH AND C STREETS
WASHINGTON, D. C.

12. 10. 15



• FIFTH FLOOR PLAN •
CEILING HEIGHT 9'-4"
• ALBEE BUILDING •
FIFTEENTH AND Q STREETS
WASHINGTON, D. C.
JANUARY 1950

Area of single floor = 6734

